

## The style-shifting of /s/ among men beauty vloggers on YouTube

Zhaoxi Yan, The University of Edinburgh

This talk studies the interaction between the sociophonetic variable /s/ in American English and the visual transformation of men beauty vloggers on YouTube. Phonetic characteristics of sibilant fricative /s/ in English are well-studied indexes of gender identity. It is found that the frontness of /s/ can index the level of femininity and queerness (e.g., Schwartz, 1968; Campbell-Kibler, 2011; Zimman, 2017; Calder, 2019). Men beauty vloggers are men who apply makeup to themselves in their vlogs in order to teach makeup skills or to recommend beauty products. In their makeup tutorial videos, they usually transform from relatively masculine looks to rather feminine looks. Since /s/ and visual transformation are both embodied variables and are often integrated into the process of self-representation, it is predicted that the visual transformation would correlate with changes in their productions of /s/. When the visual appearances of the vloggers transform from masculine to relatively feminine, the /s/ tokens in their speech might also gradually shift to be more fronted.

The analysis is based on 100 sample YouTube videos of 20 vloggers and over 40 thousand /s/ token. Analysis of the correlation between the CoG of /s/ and the time course of putting on makeup in sample videos finds both intra-speaker style shifts and inter-speaker differences (Table1). Intra-speaker style shifts of /s/ are found from 8 out of 20 vloggers. Significant correlations have been found in 8 out of 20 sample vloggers. For these 8 vloggers, their CoG of /s/ shifts significantly by the end of the visual transformations. However, the directions of the shifts are different. For 5 of the vloggers, their CoG of /s/ increases gradually through the visual transformation and for the other 3 vloggers, their CoG of /s/ decreases gradually through the visual transformation. Besides the differences in directions of the shifts, the analysis also finds other inter-speaker differences including the average and range of CoG of /s/ and styles of visual transformations.

Besides gender, the frontness of /s/ can index qualities like “loud”, “harsh” and “aggressive” (Fastl, 2005; Kajino, 2014; Calder, 2019). This explains the complexity of the results and the inter-speaker differences observed, although there are few differences between the vloggers’ visual transformation. The results suggest that the vloggers make use of various social meanings of /s/ to fulfil different functions like persona construction, branding and networking.

For example, James Charles, one of the sample vloggers, has generally more fronted /s/ (average CoG of /s/ is 7514 Hz) and constructs an online persona of a young, excitable and passionate “makeup artist. Many of his videos are about creative makeup looks. While other vloggers, like Jeffree Star, use less fronted /s/ constructing online personae of composed and experienced “product reviewer” to win viewers’ trust.

For implication, by observing quite salient style-shifting of /s/ in a relatively short time course, this study is able to illustrate the concept of embodiment showing how the body participates in the process of self-representation and how embodied variables interact with each other.

## References

- Campbell-Kibler, K. (2011). Intersecting variables and perceived sexual orientation in men. *American Speech* 86(1). 52–68.
- Calder, J. (2019). The fierceness of fronted /s/: Linguistic rhematization through visual transformation. *Language in Society*, 48(1), 31-64.
- Fastl, H. (2005). Psychoacoustics and sound quality. In Jens Blauert (ed.), *Communication acoustics*, 139–62. Berlin: Springer.
- Kajino, Sakiko (2014). *Sociophonetic variation at the intersection of gender, region, and style in Japanese female speech*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University dissertation.
- Schwartz, M. (1968). Identification of Speaker Sex from Isolated, Voiceless Fricatives. *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 43(5), 1178-1179.
- Zimman, L. (2017). Variability in /s/ among transgender speakers: Evidence for a socially grounded account of gender and sibilants. *Linguistics*, 55(5), 993-1019.

Vlogger	Estimate	Std.Error	T-value	P-Value	Direction
Alex Faction	431.38	172.35	2.50	0.0124 *	+
Bretman Rock	-388.20	198.90	-1.95	0.0511 .	-
Derek Kildall	-84.74	189.22	-0.45	0.654	
Edward Avila	-151.62	124.71	-1.22	0.224	
Gabriel Zamora	212.56	130.28	1.63	0.103	
Jack Emory	102.95	125.98	0.82	0.414	
Jack Warden	-4.53	243.28	-0.02	0.985	
James Charles	280.54	127.73	2.20	0.0282 *	+
Jeffree Star	-61.17	127.16	-0.48	0.631	
Kenneth Senegal	-87.94	163.06	-0.54	0.59	
Kian Owen	142.10	259.10	0.55	0.584	
Lewys Ball	-220.35	164.56	-1.34	0.181	
Louie Castro	591.00	200.20	2.95	0.00322**	+
Manny MUA	438.70	125.43	3.50	0.000479***	+
Marc Zapanta	510.60	213.10	2.40	0.0167*	+
Michael Finch	42.53	152.93	0.28	0.781	
Patrick Starr	-40.86	134.64	-0.30	0.762	
ReubenDe Maid	-516.7	247.1	-2.09	0.0368*	-
Thomas Helbert	-149.0	176.7	-0.84	0.399	
Wayne Goss	-224.19	103.12	-2.17	0.0299*	-

Table 1. Linear mixed effect (with the fixed effect of syllable position) results of the correlation between the time course of putting on makeup and CoG of /s/ (“Direction” indicates whether the correlation is positive or negative)